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SUBJECT: YEMENI VIEWS ON ELECTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF IRAQ

Summary:

¶1. (SBU) Liberal elites, moderate Islamists, ROYG officials as well as civil society activists and journalists in Yemen are unanimous in considering the recent elections held in Iraq as a step in the right direction. All are equally unanimous, however, in expressing skepticism that these elections, in and of themselves, could guarantee a peaceful progress towards full-fledged democracy in Iraq. The ROYG, in particular, has been eerily silent in terms of official commentary and very low-key in unofficial discussions of the elections. Having at first expressed their intent to send observers to the elections, the ROYG pulled out of a proposed partnership with a Canadian delegation to Baghdad at the eleventh hour. The Yemeni street has not reacted in any obvious manner to the elections, reflecting perhaps the same wait-and-see attitude of their government. Amidst a realization that developments in Iraq would ultimately impact the Gulf region and Yemen, all discussions of Iraq's future remain tinged with a Sunni Arab weariness of a Shia majority assuming power in Baghdad. End Summary.

On the positive side, "What a relief!"

¶2. (SBU) Local journalists and intellectuals expressed relief that election-related violence was much less than had been forecast. Most were willing to admit that the mere fact that the elections took place despite all the violence and political complications was an important achievement. The main challenge remained, according to many of our media interlocutors, the task of including the Sunni community in the next steps in shaping Iraq's future, agreeing on a constitution and, not incidentally, ending U.S. occupation.

¶4. (SBU) The majority of educated, reform-minded Yemeni elite, including those within the ROYG, embrace the hope that democracy will one day take root in Iraq and thereby boosting the chances of economic and democratic reform in the region. A senior Yemeni diplomat exclaimed, in a private meeting with embassy officers, "The elections were great! I'm glad they took place." The same diplomat, however, was certain that his government would not be forthcoming any time soon with any encouraging statement to the IIG on its efforts. Civil society activists have expressed similar sentiments towards the elections but remained skeptical about the ultimate success of the Iraqi democratic experiment. One minor-tribal leader pointing to Lebanon as the most democratic Arab state, perhaps followed by Yemen, concluded that even in these two small and not very influential countries, democracy was not exactly secure. Some of our interlocutors expressed the hope that the U.S. would do more for democracy in the region and be more aggressive in pursuing democratic reform than it has hitherto been.

Shia-Phobia raises its ugly head

¶5. (SBU) All our interlocutors voiced concerns about the very low turnout of Sunni voters in Iraq. While most phrased their concern in terms of the balance that was needed in any emerging political system, some were blunt in voicing their apprehension about the emergence of a Shia majority in Baghdad and the possibility of another Khomeini-style theocracy taking hold. Contacts in Aden, known for their less conservative views, share the same skepticism about a Shia-dominated government as their northern counterparts. They fear, despite Allawi's assurances, that a non-representative Iraqi Parliament will fail to produce a viable constitution with protection of minority-Sunni rights. Interspersed with seemingly rational political arguments, an outright admission of distrust of Shia Muslims in general was also expressed. Despite Yemeni-Sunni reformers' expressed support for democracy, many could not mask their disappointment that the Sistani-block swept the elections, unconvinced by Sistani's claims of support for a secularist government.

"U.S. occupation" remains a hard pill to swallow

17. (SBU) Official media reacted reflexively the day after the election, leading with headlines about "a bloody day in Iraq," and focused mainly on the violence that took place in various locations across Iraq. In the days that followed, coverage became more guarded and factual, providing the facts and figures that appeared in the international media and ending with election results and percentages. Most newspapers, official, opposition and independent, lamented the poor Sunni turnout fearing that under-representation of ethnic minorities could fuel continued violence and ultimately threaten the unity of Iraq. Anti-American sentiment was manifested in editorials and columns in several papers, including the official "al-Thawra," in which Yemen's most popular poet and intellectual asked rhetorically how any election process could have any credibility under continued American occupation. America's motives, remaining suspect in the eyes of most commentators, colored most reports on the future of Iraq. Official, opposition and independent media alike, still referred to American and coalition presence in Iraq as an odious occupation regardless of any positive outcome that may or may not result from the elections.

18. (SBU) Some self-deprecating academics in Sanaa hailed the Iraqi elections and pointed, only half-jokingly, to the irony of an Arab world that experiences more freedom under foreign occupation and internal chaos than under the more "independent and stable" conditions in the rest of the region. Man-in-the-street reactions have not been very pronounced but, anecdotally, we've heard that the average Yemeni has bought into the conspiracy theories that dismiss the Iraqi election as an "American film," a totally rigged affair that can only result in the empowerment of an Iraqi leadership that the U.S. wanted all along.

19. (SBU) Comment: In the absence of official ROYG endorsement and a dearth of bold champions among Yemeni elites, Iraqi elections and, indeed, the entire Iraqi democratic experiment, remain vague, problematic and of very questionable value, in the eyes of most Yemenis - at least until the next chapter unfolds. End Comment.
Krajeski